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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how social studies content and concepts can be explored through literature in which grandparents and grandchildren interact. The paper emphasizes that, through the intergenerational relationship, children can encounter and explore life in general, increasing their understanding of their own portion of the world and of themselves. The paper offers models for developing thematic units in primary, intermediate, and middle school grades, and the evaluation of literature selections, which includes six broad and overlapping purposes; (1) experiencing the "grand" relationship; (2) learning family stories; (3) preserving memories; (4) understanding intergenerational differences; (5) transmitting history; and (6) acquiring family and general culture; and includes a list of suggested book titles. The paper presents ways of integrating curricula and organizing instruction in these thematic units and lists the components of a typical unit: theme, content, concepts, literature, literature responses, literature strategies, and technology. The paper offers further guidelines to consider when selecting literature for use in social studies and language arts instruction: accuracy and authenticity; accuracy and truth; content and perspective; and style, organization, illustrations, and format. (Contains 4 figures on thematic units and 11 references; also contains 23 literature titles and 8 software titles.) (CR)

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Grandparents and Grandchildren in Children's Literature: Interactions That Enhance Learning

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Grandparents and Grandchildren in Children's Literature:

Interactions That Enhance Learning

No one...who has not known that inestimable privilege can possibly realize what good fortune it is to grow up in a home where there are grandparents.

-- Suzanne LaFollette (1893-1983)

Many people agree that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is a special one. We each remember events and experiences shared with our grandparents. But the real impetus for our study of literature depicting grandparent and grandchildren interactions grew out of our becoming grandparents. We realized immediately that the special bond is not inherent in the status; it must be developed and nurtured.

Unfortunately, there are few research studies, outside the area of gerontology, that validate the existence of this relationship and the direct influence of grandparents on grandchildren's development. In fact, there is little research evidence that most grandparents play any kind of a direct, major role in the rearing of grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). However, that might not be what actually happens. Grandchildren who are close to one or more grandparents may have greater emotional security and an enriched understanding of the world (Fintushel, 1993). That is our belief.

For a long time, the portrayal of grandparents in children's literature was stereotypical and not very positive (Janelli, 1993) Fortunately, many portrayals of grandparents in children's literature are now appealing, realistic, and down-right delightful (Beck, 1992; Freeman, 1993; Janelli, 1993; Kupetz, 1994). In a themed section of ***Book Links*** (Classroom, 1995), books are categorized showing Grandparents as people to be enjoyed and celebrated, as sources of family stories, as memory stimuli, and as friends for youngsters. Representative of such literature are ***When I Am Old With You,*** in which Angela Johnson (1990) writes with sensitivity about a child who expresses "When I am old with you, Granddaddy, I will sit in a big rocking chair beside you and talk about everything;" and, ***Knots on a Counting Rope,*** in which Bill Martin and John Archambault (1987) write about a grandfather instilling a Native American heritage in his blind grandson; and, ***The Always Prayer Shawl,*** in which Sheldon Oberman (1994) has Adam convey to his grandson that despite the physical changes that have occurred over time to him and to his prayer shawl, he and his values have not changed.

We believe that encountering social studies through literature provides opportunities for learning about how authors use features of language and text structures to create meaning. Children and young adults cannot gather information without knowing where that information is found, how it is presented in written and graphic form, and how it might efficiently and effectively be presented in other forms. When learning about how meaning is created in text, we see three main purposes for reading:

- *Reading for personal and aesthetic response*, which means reading to enjoy and appreciate various texts;
- *Reading for acquiring, interpreting, and using information*, which means reading to collect data and use the gained knowledge to generate new ideas and text forms, and,
- *Reading for critical analysis and evaluation*, which means reading to form opinions and make judgments about the ideas and information in the text being read and other texts.

We believe instructional uses of literature should be aimed at familiarizing students with the features of each literature genre. Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction, Biography, and Documentaries, for example, have features in common, yet they have distinguishing features. For discussions of the specific similarities and differences among genres, we suggest teachers refer to sources such as Cullinan & Galda (1994), Huck, Hepler, & Hickman (1993), Lukens (1995), and Lukens and Cline (1995).

In this article, our focus is on how social studies content and concepts can be explored through literature in which grandparents and grandchildren interact. We also aim to show how through the intergenerational relationship children encounter and explore life in general, and through that exploration increase their understanding of their own portion of the world, and, most important, of themselves. We present the purposes for reading grandparent books, provide a model for developing thematic units in primary, intermediate, and middle school

grades, and the evauation of literature selections. Our discussion of themeatic units includes students' responses to the literature, literature reading strategies, and technology integration.

Reading Grandparent Books

In the model we developed, intergenerational literature featuring grandparents is read for six broad and overlapping purposes.

- *Experiencing the "grand" relationship.* The special relationship that bonds grandparents and grandchildren is celebrated in books showing the two generations experiencing life together. In ***Granddaddy's Highway*** (Diller 1993), Granddaddy's bedtime story is an imaginative tale of a cross country truck ride across the USA. ***The Long Silk Strand*** (Williams, 1995) relates a grandmother's lesson to her granddaughter about the natural order of life and death and a grandparent's role in explaining the phenomenon within each generation.
- *Learning family stories.* Families have stories about everyday occurrences and events. Many center about grandparents' homes and lives. In ***Grandfather's Journey*** (Say, 1993), a grandson tells about his grandfather's migration to and from Japan and his own feelings about following his grandfather's route. ***A Moon in My Teacup*** (Riggio, 1993) is a young girl's recollection of how Christmas was celebrated at her grandparents' house.

- *Preserving memories.* Particular objects often contain the spark for igniting memories of grandparents. In ***Basket*** (Lyon, 1990), a granddaughter imagines her grandmother singing every time she sees or uses the almost discarded basket. And, ***My Grandmother's Cookie Jar*** (Miller, 1987) holds not only sweets but grandmother's precious stories.
- *Understanding intergenerational differences.* A difficult concept for many children is the problems experienced by grandparents as a result of aging; a process which can destroy or enhance what might have been very grand relationships. The tale of how a grandchild assumes the role of teacher to aid his grandfather's recovery is poignantly told in ***Now One Foot, Now the Other*** (De Paola, 1980). A granddaughter's understanding of her grandfather's grief and how she alters her original perception of him as a mean old man is told in ***Grandfather's Day*** (Tomey, 1992).
- *Transmitting history.* Actual events and historical periods become relevant to children as they become aware of their grandparents' experiences. ***The Night Journey*** (Lasky, 1981) brings to life to a young adult the terrible pogroms against the Jews in Poland and the plight of thousands of people as they migrated to the United States. In ***A Boat to Nowhere*** (Wartski, 1980), two children and their grandfather endure severe hardships and perils as they join the throng of Vietnamese boat people.
- *Acquiring family and general culture.* In our pluralistic society, the transmission of culture is important for the development of one's identity and sense of

belonging. A grandparent's role in maintaining cultural heritage is sensitively pictured and told in ***The Whispering Cloth*** (Shea, 1995). Through learning how to weave a tapestry, a granddaughter gains both a special craft and an understanding of her Vietnamese culture. During ***Anna's Athabaskan Summer*** (Griese, 1995), she learns from her grandmother the distinctive relationship Eskimos have with their environment.

We do not believe these categories of purposes for reading are absolutes, nor do we think works of intergenerational literature are single purposed in nature. Each piece of literature can and should be read for several purposes or read at different times for different purposes.

Creating Thematic Units with Grandparent Books

In our work with teachers and children, we aim to achieve an intergenerational perspective of Social Studies through focused thematic units. These units are ways of organizing information, not by a single subject area but by the way that the theme crosses lines of the content and concepts of different subject areas. We see them as ways to integrate curricula and to organize instruction. Components of a typical unit are shown in Figure 1 and include:

- **Theme.** The major idea of the unit. A *theme* differs from a *topic* in that a topic is a subject such as weather, popcorn or fractions. A theme is a generalization, value, perspective or point-of-view. For example, these are themes: *Changes*

occur in people as they age; Grandparents preserve memories and family traditions.

- **Content.** The specific information about the topic and theme to be learned from Social Studies.
- **Concepts.** The major generalizations related to the Content that are taught and learned through the unit; they are theme and content related.
- **Literature.** The specific stories, poems, books and other works to be read by students.
- **Literature Responses.** The oral, written, and artistic ways readers react to literature both during and after reading.
- **Literature Strategies.** The reading and writing strategies that make it possible to comprehend the piece of literature.
- **Technology.** The available multimedia materials, products and experiences with which students are involved to gain information and use the ideas of the unit, as well as to produce and present their personal interpretations and responses.

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Figure 1 about here

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Using the thematic unit paradigm, we present three intergenerational units appropriate for use in primary grades, intermediate grades, and middle schools (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

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Figures 2, 3, and 4 about here

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Primary Grades Unit. Through the literature in the elementary primary grades unit, students can begin or extend their understanding of the theme, "A special relationship exists between grandparents and grandchildren." Such a theme supports the topic of families frequently studied in primary grades. Through the special relationships that exist between grandparent and grandchild, students learn that frequently grandparents play a significant role in their lives and the lives of their family. ***Through Grandpa's Eyes*** (MacLachlan, 1980) describes how John and his sightless grandpa each has his own way of seeing as they share the sounds and smells of everyday things. In ***The Cherry Tree*** (Bond, 1991), six year old Rakhi and her grandfather live in the Himalayas and experience the planting, nurturing, and growing of a cherry tree as well as that of Rakhi's growing up. ***Something From Nothing*** (Gilman, 1992), is the retelling of a Jewish folktale in which Joseph believes, and is usually correct in believing, that grandpa who created his wonderful baby blanket can continually make it into something meaningful as it becomes old and worn. Responses to the literature provide opportunities for students to share their own meaningful relationships with

grandparents, create grandparent photo journals, and establish meaningful dialogues with existing grandparents. Strategies for constructing meaning include learning about how authors create first person narratives, structure chronological plots, and use the structure and sounds of language to develop predictable texts. Multimedia interactions with ***Just Grandma and Me***, ***Kid Works***, and ***Storybook Weaver*** extend students' literacy experiences through interactive electronic reading, responding, and composing of texts and illustrations.

Intermediate Grades Unit. Through the texts in the elementary intermediate grades, students can begin or extend their understanding of the theme, "Children learn about their family heritage through relationships with grandparents." In each of the books, the plots are developed through a grandchild's interaction with a grandparent. ***A Balloon for Granddad*** (Gray, 1988) allows children to gain information and an appreciation of the life and culture of North Africa. ***Abuela's Weave*** (Castañeda, 1993) shows them the life and culture of Guatemala. In ***My Grandpa and the Sea*** (Orr, 1990), children experience the life and culture of St. Lucia in the West Indies. Through the literature, students gain insights about the geography and economics of the cultures. Responses to the literature provide opportunities for students to prepare imaginary interviews with the stories' grandparents about their native land. Using the information from those interviews, the students create brochures extolling reasons for traveling to the read-about locales. Or, they prepare story lines for video documentaries of one of the cultures. Strategies for constructing meaning include understanding how authors

craft persuasive arguments and how they create sensory images through descriptive writing techniques. Multimedia interactions with ***PC Globe*** provide students with opportunities to read information in atlas and almanac formats, and ***Timeliner*** and ***Family Tree Maker*** allow them to organize the grandparents' life stories.

Middle School Unit. Through the texts in the middle school unit, students can begin or extend their understanding of the theme, "Through interactions with grandparents, children learn about families' past and present cultures." Students learn from this unit that one's identity does not have to be forfeited when confronted with changing and diverse values. In ***Child of the Owl*** (Yep, 1977), there is information about the life and culture of a Chinese-American family and how a young person learns to appreciate both Chinese and American values. ***The Friendstone*** (Derman, 1981) provides information about the life and culture of one Jewish-American and one non-Jewish-American family and how a non-Jewish girl learns about anti-Semitism and to cope with bigotry within her own family. ***The House of Wings*** (Byars, 1982) provides information about the life and culture of rural Ohio and how a "city boy" learns to value rural living. Through the literature, students gain understanding about how the values of older and newer cultures and subcultures change in interaction with each other. Responses to literature provide students with opportunities to create graphic organizers that highlight the differences in the value systems of the older and younger characters in the stories and to write chronicles of the story families' activities in adapting to life in America

or a different locale. Strategies for constructing meaning include learning how authors express values through characters actions as well as the spoken ideas. Multimedia interactions with ***My Own Stories, The Amazing Writing Machine,*** and ***Children's Writing & Publishing Center*** allow students to create narratives using information about various cultural backgrounds.

Evaluating Literature for Use In Thematic Units

When we select literature for use in Social Studies and Language Arts instruction, we use certain criteria. The specific guidelines we use for selecting general literature that is developmentally appropriate for children and young adults can be found in Cullinan & Galda (1994). In regards to the appropriateness of the Social Studies content of books about grandparents and grandchildren, we suggest consideration be given to the following:

- **Accuracy and authenticity.** The author or some other knowledgeable person should attest to the accuracy of the information. For example, David Williams (1993) explains how he authenticated the story of his ***Grandma Essie's Covered Wagon.*** And, Marsha Kibbey's accurate portrayal of ***My Granny*** is supported by the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association.
- **Accuracy and truth**. Just because a book is allegedly based on fact doesn't mean it tells the truth. This may seem to be a contradiction, but many readers believe that "if it's a fact, it must be true and not an opinion." Truth may be in

the eye of the beholder, so an author's depiction of a family story, an historical event, or memory needs to be considered carefully.

For example, Cynthia Rylant's ***When I was Young in the Mountains*** presents a delightful tale of growing up in rural America and a nostalgic recounting of the pleasurable times spent with grandparents. However, it is a somewhat romanticized image of life in a mountain coal mining village. The reminiscence of events involving an out-house, swimming hole, and bathing in a tin tub may be accurate, but the purposeful omission of some of the hardships and deprivations that were encountered while growing up colors the truth of rural mountain life.

- **Content and perspective.** The content and perspective must be appropriate
  - within the framework of a Social Studies curriculum.

    The theme and generalizations in the books should be consistent with the broad Social Studies curricula found in schools. This usually means developing three sets of knowledge and attitudes: getting children to know about their world, getting them to care about their world, and getting them to be able to do something about their world.
  - for the most up-to-date thinking about the topic.

    For example, we have all seen how the historical and social perspectives concerning Christopher Columbus, Native Americans, and immigrants have undergone change in the last five years.

- **Style, organization, illustrations and format.** The style, organization, and graphic materials must all be appropriate for the audience and the intended purpose of the book.

Conclusion

Hodding Carter, the American author, has been attributed with saying, "There are only two lasting bequests we can give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings." In our work with teachers and students, we have tried to show how literature in which grandparents and grandchildren interact not only gives them "roots"--a strong hold on their own heritage and values--but "wings"--the opportunity to move into other cultures.

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Figure 1

Creating Thematic Units

Figure 2
Grandparents and Grandchildren
Primary Grades Unit

THEME: A special relationship exists between grandparents and grandchildren.

CONTENT: Social

CONCEPTS: Identity, Empathy, Culture, Change

LITERATURE:

Through Grandpa's Eyes by Patricia MacLachlan
The Cherry Tree by Ruskin Bond
Something From Nothing by Phoebe Gilman

LITERATURE RESPONSES:

Oral sharing of special relationship stories
Composing and illustrating special relationship events
Corresponding with grandparents

LITERATURE STRATEGIES:

Understanding first person narrative stories,
Understanding chronological plot development
Understanding the structure and appreciating the sounds of predictable language texts

TECHNOLOGY USE:

Just Grandma and Me, Kid Works, Storybook Weaver

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Figure 3
Grandparents and Grandchildren
Intermediate Grades Unit

THEME: Children learn about their family heritage through relationships with grandparents.

CONTENT: Geographic, Economic, Social

CONCEPTS: Culture, Empathy, Environment, Identity, Diversity

LITERATURE:

A Balloon for Granddad by Nigel Gray
Abelua's Weave by Omar S. Castañeda
My Grandpa and the Sea by Katherine Orr

LITERATURE RESPONSES:

Creating an imaginary Interview with one of the books' grandparents
Creating travel brochures for one of the locales discussed in the books
Preparing one of the book's story line for a video documentary

LITERATURE STRATEGIES:

Understanding how persuasive arguments are written
Understanding how sensory images are created in descriptive passages

TECHNOLOGY USE:

PC Globe, Timeliner, Family Tree Maker

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Figure 4
Grandparents and Grandchildren
Middle School Unit

THEME: Through interactions with grandparents, children learn about families' past and present cultures.

CONTENT: Historic, Economic, Social

CONCEPTS: Change, Culture, Empathy, Identity, Choice, Diversity

LITERATURE:

Child of the Owl by Laurence Yep
The Friendstone by Martha Derman
The House of Wings by Betsy Byars

LITERATURE RESPONSES:

Creating graphic organizers to highlight differences in values
Writing fictitious immigrant family chronicles in America

LITERATURE STRATEGIES:

Understanding how authors express values in characters' actions as well as spoken ideas

TECHNOLOGY USE:

My Own Stories, The Amazing Writing Machine, Children's Writing & Publishing Center